Diffusion TECH EQUITY

2026 CALIFORNIA AI COMPASS

A year of AI changed California's habits, but not its conviction that AI must have strong guardrails

Californians have settled the question of whether AI needs strong guardrails, and their answer is resoundingly "yes." Heading into the critical last weeks of the 2026 legislative session, we surveyed 3,164 California adults to understand how they feel about AI and what they want their legislators to do about it, deliberately re-asking many of the questions we put to the state in May 2025 so we could see what a year of mass adoption changed, and what it did not.

We found that more Californians than ever are using AI tools.

79% say they have now used an AI tool, 58% use one at least weekly, and trust in AI to make important decisions about you has risen from 15% to 23%.

Yet more and more people have lost faith in the AI project, and in the companies and people building it.

Net excitement about its future fell 8 points from −21 to −29, while net favorability toward AI fell 8 points from +14 to +6 even while use rose. Of all the people and institutions we tested, "AI company executives" came out worst, at −24 net favorability, the lowest score in California politics, below even Elon Musk (himself at −18). 60% of Californians believe AI's benefits will flow to the wealthiest households and corporations, against 22% who believe working people will benefit. Meanwhile, only 31% think it will create new jobs. In fact, more people believe AI will take control of nuclear weapons (35%) than create new jobs. While faith in AI and the people making it has fallen, the demand for strong laws has not. When choosing between letting companies innovate responsibly and mandating strong laws, 70% of people choose the stronger laws. A figure that is effectively unchanged since May 2025.

But only 5% of Californians call the power of big tech companies a top-three issue; instead, they see AI impacting the things they do care deeply about.

Inflation (a top-three issue for 68%), housing (43%), and jobs (35%) own the state's attention, and Californians increasingly see AI as a force behind those worries: 58% are concerned AI will make essentials like housing and electricity more expensive, and nearly half think it's likely or very likely that it will. This broad concern is also matched by a more personal frustration with how AI systems are already being used by some organizations, such as the 43% of Californians who have personally been trapped by an automated system that would not let them reach a human.

Yet each of these concerns has a clear policy response, and Californians overwhelmingly support these policy ideas.

We tested seven proposals drawn from bills before the legislature this session. The six aimed at protecting the public, on issues from automated firings and workplace surveillance to AI-driven job cuts and personalized pricing, won by net margins of +42 to +67. Meanwhile, the approach that provided laxer guardrails was rejected by almost three to one. The strongest result came for SB 947, which would require a person, rather than an AI system alone, to make the final decision when a worker is disciplined or fired. It won support by 75% to 8%, including net margins of +70 among Republicans and +82 among seniors. Nor did that support fall away when challenged: for five of the proposals, we first gave Californians the strongest counterargument the industry could make, and all five still won by clear margins. Beyond the policies themselves, we also find that tech money may now cost candidates votes. When told that a candidate was funded by "tech billionaires like Sam Altman and Peter Thiel", 22% said they would be much less likely to support that candidate.

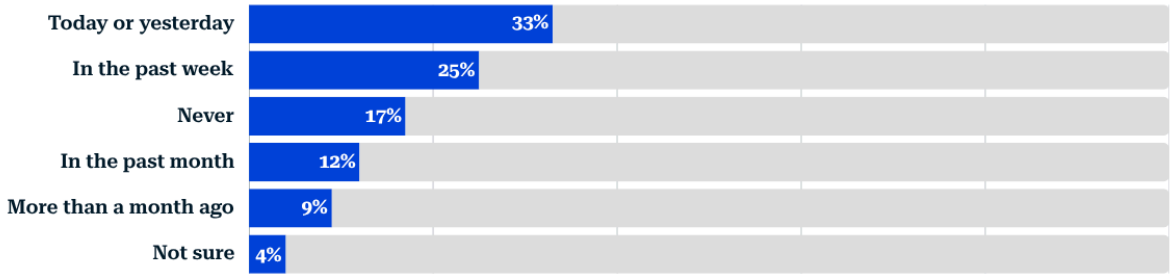
One reason we trust these findings is that we found them twice.

Across two large surveys, run a year apart with different questions and samples, the core results barely moved: the 70–21 split in favor of strong laws, the 60–22 belief that AI's gains will flow to the wealthiest households and corporations, and the deep lack of trust in the companies building it. Where views did shift, they moved towards stronger state action. For legislators, that stability is the key finding. Across parties, regions and levels of AI use, Californians do not need to be convinced that AI needs rules. They want to know who will put them in place.

Appendix

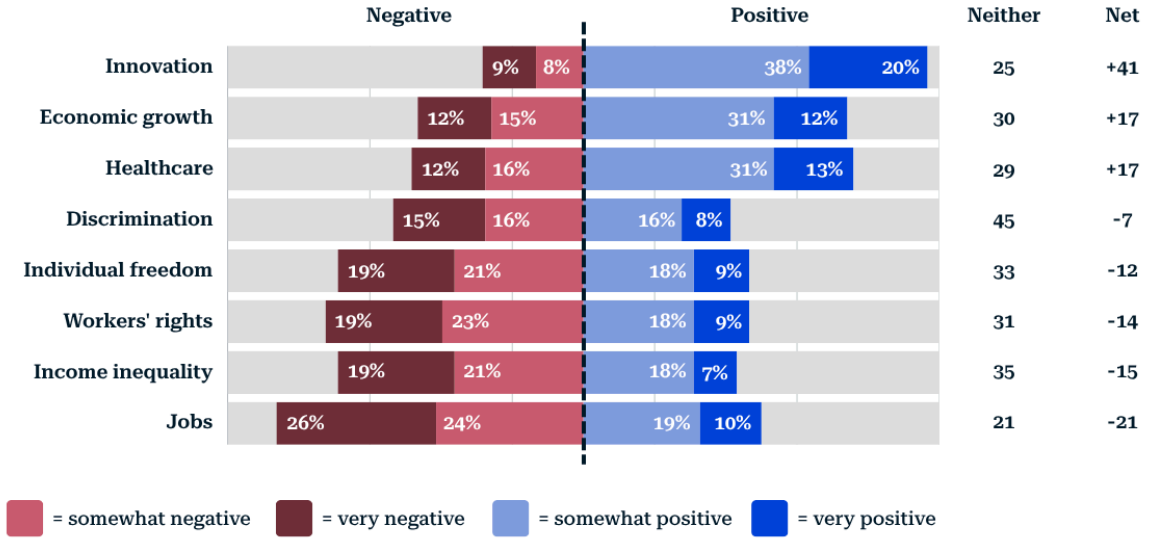
AI is now routine for most Californians

Q: When did you last use an AI tool?



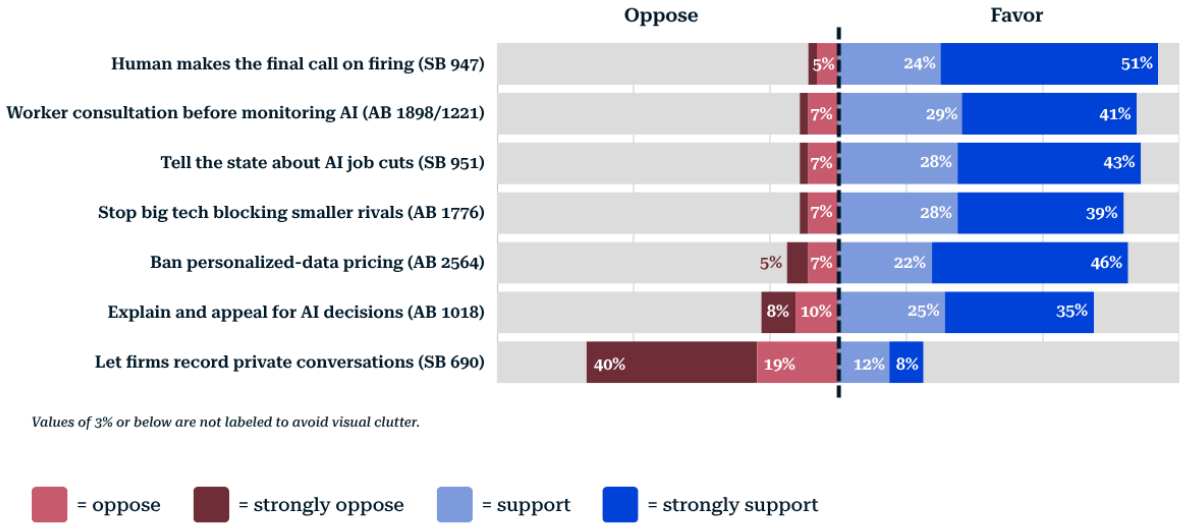
AI is expected to help growth and innovation, and hurt jobs and equality

Q: AI impact on society



Every protective proposal wins decisively; the permissive one loses badly

Q: Policy positions

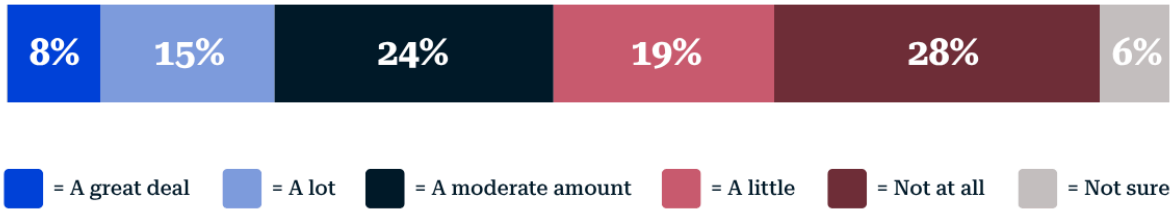


Values of 3% or below are not labeled to avoid visual clutter.

= oppose = strongly oppose = support = strongly support

Most Californians would not trust AI to make a decision about them

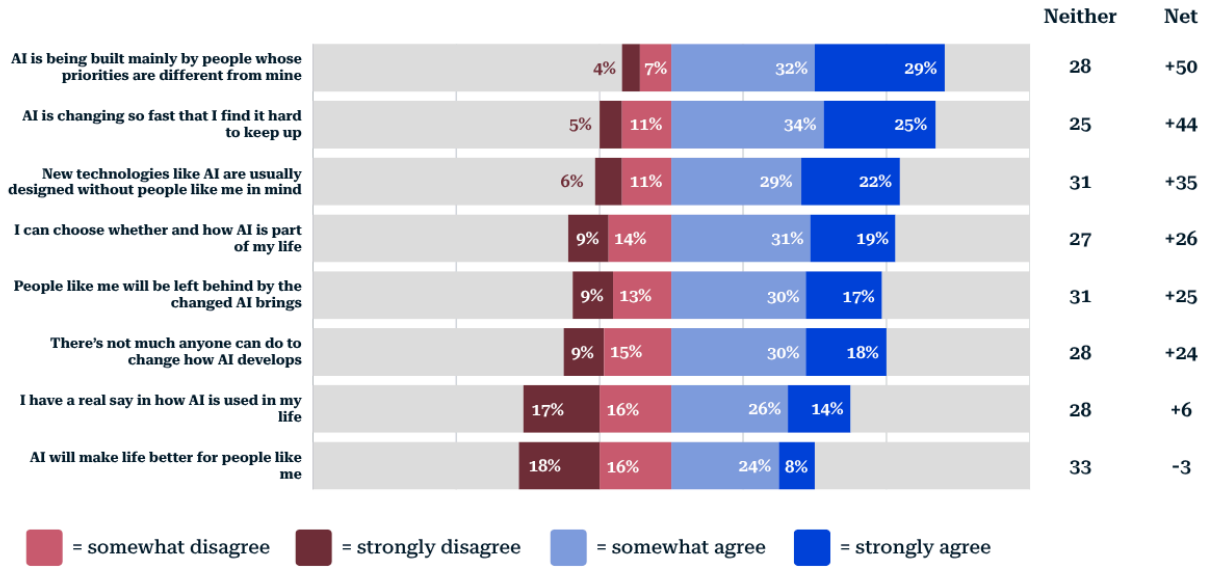
Q: How much would you trust AI systems to make decisions that affect you?



= A great deal = A lot = A moderate amount = A little = Not at all = Not sure

Californians feel like AI is built by people with different priorities, and not for them

Q: AI attitudes



Full report and polling results will be made available in September.